CHICAGO PRESBYTERY MARINERS

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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NORWOOD PARK

LOVE: GIFT AND COMMITMENT

Thirty two years ago today I was 21 years old, a senior in college - and I was doing something which sounds very peculiar in the world of 21 year-olds today... I was making last minute plans for my wedding - which was to happen the next week - March 21, - the first day of Spring - sort of... J. S. Bach's birthday... and that year, the day before Palm Sunday.

The woman I was going to marry was 20 years old... We met in Junior High, dated one and off in high school, and college... knew at about 19 what we wanted to do and at 21 we did it. We were married through graduate school... began our parenting at an early age... have five children and two grandchildren - and are today part of what is now a minoirty or soon be - people still married to

the same person...

Garrison Keillor has a book by that title, by the way - We Are Still Married - short stories - and the concluding one, by that title, is about a very difficult mid-life-crisis and how a patient spouse - in this story, a man - waits until the crisis passes, forgives, welcomes his wife back home - and on they go... The point is if you are still married, it hasn't been easy. Certainly not without some very rough minutes.

And so - at the outset - a disclaimer some of the finest, loveliest, and kindest, most devout and faithful people I know have been divorced. It is thin ice indeed to assume a posture of self-righteousness about still being married. In fact, part of me wants to say - we are - because of dumb luck... or in moments of pure candor - because of her (I'm not sure I could be married to me - in fact, I'm certain I couldn't. I'd drive me crazy).

I used to think it was because divorce was simply not an alternative for us and that mostly

unspoken determination was both a burden but a liberation - so that we either overlooked or forgave or decided to live with little problems which could have become major problems - I'm not sure about that any more.

And it occurs to me that maybe something of grace - which is always a gift of God - gets into the relationship, but I'm hesitant to say that because as soon as you start to claim grace - it disappears - and I'm not about to say God does favors for me which are not then for others - it's a theological __enisisting I can't abide...

But, in fact, we are still married - and so are you -

Congratulations - you too are part of a segment of American society which will be a majority of the whole population.

How long - 20

30

40

50

There are lots of reasons and lots of people analyzing them and I won't take a lot of time telling you what you already know or can learn elsewhere.

It is not easy. It never has been - but it is less easy today than every before.

Part of it is that nothing is stable. The only norm is change and the rate of change across our culture is accelerating.

Communication - travel - Australia in 17 hours - used to take a year...

Wars were fought and won before anybody at home knew about it... last month we watched it, looked over pilot's shoulder.

New telephone technology... video screens - long part of science fiction/ soon available / conference calls /fewer meetings, I objected -

Marc said - you can see your grandchildren when you talk to them - I said "sign me up." Well - in terms of travel think of change in several

_____ and mores and expectations - as they impact marriage. It has always been difficult to know exactly how we're behaving sexually. In fact, before Kinsey nobody seriously tried to discover.

Now we know - maybe more than we want to know.

Part of my own nostalgia and creeping fuddy-duddyism - is that I simply don't want to know everything about who's doing what to whom and under what conditions. On more than one occasion, when one of our youngsters in the name of integrity and parent - teenager sharing and communicator was about to tell us something _____ we would say - "You know - we happen not knowing what you are about to tell us. Are you sure you want us to communicate about this topic?"

Anyhow we do know some things we didn't know before - such as - males are fully functioning sexual beings at 16 - give or take a few years; females - the same - and nature has built into that woman the capacity for conception and everything

necessary for conception and will _____ it fairly ready for a pretty long time.

We now know that there are no rules strong enough, no punishment severe enough to make this truth about us go away.

We also know that if the culture, for one reason or another, necessitates delaying marriage, say for economic - or educational reasons - those young people have a very major dilemma... which they will probably solve...

Now if we do not change at all, if all we have to say is "don't do it before marriage and it's OK to do it as much as you want after marriage, that is not terribly helpful. It may make us feel better - as if - in saying it we have done something about the level of public morality, but we will not have accomplished anything - except perhaps to shut off a communications link with people who are struggling with the dillema... and from the perspective of the church, demonstrated again that we are irrelevant to the ambiguities of

life in the world. There is no evidence that taking the hard line - has any measurable impact in how people behave.

Now this is not a speech on sexual behavior and faith - but this dimension of human relationships is very critical at the moment - because change has happened so very rapidly. I, for one, want my church to say something more on the topic than "don't." And while Presbyterians may get very exercised at what they read in or about our new study on Human Sexuality - and differ profoundly with the recommendation arrived at by 10 members of the Task Force, I am pleased that our church continues to know what the right questions are and continues to have the conviction to ask them...

There are major changes in sexual behavior and public discourse about sexual behavior. But, of course, the greatest change of all is simply that "divorce has become a viable, no-fault, option. We are living in an age of divorce.

In a new book, Englishman Lawrence Stone says we are "a divorcing society..."

J. L. Milton, a long time ago, observed that a marriage without love and respect is dead and should be buried as quickly as possible. but it has only been recently that society changed to allow divorce to become the norm.

The 1990 statistical abstracts of the United States reveal it - bluntly - if you are ever _____ of preachers and others are exaggerating for effect.

Out of 1,000 Americans

9.7% will get married

4.8% will be divorced

That's half. It's an unadjusted figure - no facotring in of geography, religion, _____. It will be higher for middle, upper middle class urbanites. The simple truth is that among people like us - more folk will get divorced this year than will get married.

What in the world happened. Well, for one

thing divorce is no longer seen as the moral failure it once was. And anyone who works in a helping profession gives God thanks for that. It was not good that in order to gain a divorce someone had to be proven guilty of something. That was inhuman. So we have a mixed situation. More human laws: a better, less unrealistic social climate - which we applaude - but also a much higher divorce rate - which we abhore.

And part of the reason is economic. Divorce used to be the privilege of rich which men. Women rarely initiated divorce proceedings, the poor never. The poor simply slugged it out - often literally. The wealthy separated - or found other ways to deal with the death of a marriage. The poor continued being in the same house - turing every day into a hellish confrontation between two people who after a while loathed each other.

Stone reports that in 1857 in all of England, there were 4 divorces.

In 1985 - 110,000

Today - more women file than men and working class people file four times as frequently as professional people.

Well - if you object is health, fulfilled people - you can feel good that it is not necessary to remain in deadly relationshps.

But there are some unanticipated and very distressing secondary effects -

The Chicago Tribune, 12/9/90, article cited statistics: one out of 5 children under 18 has a learning, behavioral, or developmental problem that can be traced to the continuing disolution of the two parent family.

It is not easy to single parent... Single parent families are a reality - we have to learn to dal with and help - with accessible, affordable child care, for instance. They will not go away - but increast

1 of 5 kids lives with 1 parent.

A child with a single mother is 20 times more likely to be poor.

In Cabrini Green - the fulfillment of social policy, ignorance, unconcern and _____, a whole city of poor mothers and their children and unprecedented crime, violence, drug addiction, illness...

Now let's not wring our hands on the one hand - we know some of the reasons why minority families break up more frequently. We know how to help... we also know that if we don't start doing something this nation cannot and will not survive. People of good will and compassion - can in fact - let the government and the phone company hear - when selfishness dictates public policy and our sick obsession with no new taxes leads us to cancel a 15 cent surcharge on telephone bills so that poor families can have access to the communications system.

And let's cheer that among our own children there is a new and strong and wonderful commitment to marriage and family. Our kids wear us out with their endless commitment to strengthening their

relationship and loving their children. We've never seen anything like it. We think the future looks very good for a culture in which some people care that much about the precious gifts of the marriage and children.

What about us? mid-stream or more... still in love in on most days, cetainly committed to finishing the course...

Is there more than so_____ _____. are there vaith values and resources to help us on our way? You bet there are.

Bronislaw Malinowski observed "marriage presente one of the most difficult personal problems in human life: the most emotional as well as the most romantic of all human _____ has to be consolidated, into an ordinary working relationship..."

A pop song suggests a miracle when we make true lovers of frinds... but a much more arduous task is the opposite - making friends out of lovers...

And the faith value which is a resource is the supreme value of the human person; and the ethic of responsibility which is built in it.

We are - each and all - created in God's image... Our Genesis stories make the boldest theological prepositions of all -

God creates human being - in two ways -

male - Adam

female - Eve

both together - God's image

There are a lot of bad jokes about Adam and Eve...

But the beauty of their story is they look and sound like us... they don't play rules: live with limits.

Adam breaks rules, blames Eve and Eve blames the snake.

They are pushed out of paradise, not so much in punishment as in parental love, pushing its little ones out of the nest... And as they go, God knits the garments and equips them for marriage,

work, parenting - human nesting.

The word is - these are my image... in all of creation - these are most precious, most valuable.

So at the heart of our faith is the value of persons - their God given right to be free - to be treated with dignity and respect; not simply this body politic - but in relationships...

T. Rilke wrote:

"Love consiste in this

That two solitudes _____

each other

greet each other

respect each other."

In marriage, primarily and basically, the faith value of individual dighity has behavioral inplications.

In this most intimate arena, - respect - and value - are absolutely supreme.

Second -

The Gift of Relationship. We are not created for life alone... We are not complete human beings

by ourself - we need one another...

It's at the heart of the Old Testament

Covenantal theology

God creates a people

Either have more to do with people relationships (justice) than divine/human relationships (_____)

Christians are people who put a very high value on relationships.

Madeline L'Engle, Episcopalian lay woman, children's books, theological reflective, much of it growing out of her marriage to Hugh Franklin - actor

He died recently - and she wrote Two-Part Invention, the story of a marraige - wonderful book.

"We were not like the great lovers in history... For one thing, the ghreat lovers do not get married and stay married for forty years. A love which depends solely on romance, in this _____ of two attracting _____, tends to

fizzle out. The famous lovers end up dead. A long-term marriage has to move beyond chemistry to compatibility. it is certainly not that the passion disappears, but that it is conjoined with other ways of love." (p. 76]

Relationships are precious: they deserve attention - commitment - determination - and sometimes investment.

-time, for instance. I often urge young couples to do whatever is necessary to be along - together - for a weekend - a night - a month

-sometimes it's little things - an unexpected rose bud, telephone call, a card... a kiss

-sometimes it's walking hand in hand to a counselor.

Robert Fulgrum - popular author: All I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten and It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It.

'Getting married for lust or money or social or even love is usually trouble. The point is that marriage is a maze into which we wander, a maze

that is best got through with a great compansion."

he tells a story about a village in the south of France where the Feast Day of St. John is celebrated with great festivity all day long - concluding with a bonfire and folk dancing evening. In the middle of the morning, couples - married - lovers - engaged - state their intent to remain together forever, hold hands and jump through the fire."

It takes a little of that - friendship - companionship - respect - dependability/

Finally and most important, faith resource our secret - love is a verb - not a noun, not primarily something you feel - but something you do.

Fulghrum

"The warranty in the wedding license is only good for 24 hours."

The decision to be married is not made once - but daily... often when you aren't feel lovey or lovely

Couples often ask for I Corinthians 13 J.B. Phillips -

"This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience—it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

"Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not compile statistics of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when Truth prevails.

"Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen."

Paul - love is a verb - almost a discipline which works in relationships.

Love doesn't waith to feel loving.

In theological terms - love is grace - love not dependent on merit or bellowed, love that takes

the _____.

-Love - is acceptance

-actual acceptance - forgiveness

-doesn't waith for apology

---worst line in history - "love means never having to say you're sorry."

Opposite is the case.

In fact the love God has for world

-which we see in Christ

gracious, fogiving, self-sacrificing

is precisely the love to which we are called in marriage.

And when we give it - a miracle happens - more is given to us.

-and we find that there are days when we stand in awe before the miracle of our own love.

Professor Joseph Sittler, brilliant theologian - a mentor - was deeply devoted to his wife...

In a book - Grace Notes this wonderful _____ on marriage - Love, Gift = Commitment